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Drup Number One

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The lock click-licked when Sklodovich inserted the broken bit of hanger into the keyhole and gave a sharp, confident twist. The door burped open.

Sklodovich, throwing his head back to clear the view through his overlong, black hair, peeped out, scanned the empty corridor and darted into the slightly open door to his left with Arnold Trewitz, pink robe wrapped tightly, slippers flopping, right behind. The door closed with a snap behind them and Arnold found himself facing a lean bird of a man with saucer eyes bulging in soporific surprise, a look which Arnold was beginning to associate with patients at Japeth Psychiatric Research Hospital. Toucan eyes fixed on Arnold’s flushed face before the man’s white-gowned arm-wing swooped up to pull Sklodovich’s shaggy head down to accept a whisper.

“A guy come in wit you,” chirped the little man.

“I know. He’s with me,” said Sklodovich.

“You sure?”

“Yes. Are you?”

“Me? Me? Me?” The huge eyes seemed to be ready to pop—spreading, thought Arnold, a spray of aqueous humor which would fill the room. “What do you ask me?”

“He’s with me.”

“Good,” said the little man looking at Arnold and scratching a few wisps of white hair on his bald head into Dirksenian dance. “Just want to be sure. Tell me,” he whispered clawing Sklodovich’s sleeve into a crinkly mess, “are dey still out dere?”

“No. Look for yourself.” Sklodovich gently removed the hand from his blue polka-dot pajama sleeve.


“Arnold and I have to see Dante,” Sklodovich whispered.

“Ahnold?”

“This is Arnold. He came in with me.”
"I see. Come wit me."

He hopped across the room which looked to Arnold much like the one he had shared with the big man who thought he was a Russian welder. One bed was neatly made. In the other, a large bulge under a crazy quilt shivered with fear, illness, or shock. The bird opened the closed door.

"They maybe ain't there now," he mumbled to himself as he pulled boxes out of the closet, "but open that door too wide and dey'll be dere so fast, so fast it'll make you pee-pee in your pants I tell ya."

Sklodovich nodded, stepped into the closet and removed a loose-fitting plasterboard panel. Beyond the panel Arnold could see a white-gray tile floor with random cracks fissuring them without pattern. Arnold followed Sklodovich through the closet wall unsure of how he had been covertly convinced to seek the aid of a vague, mad demi-deity named Dante. But Arnold had tried everything else to convince the seemingly deaf doctors that he had been brought to the hospital by a combination of bad luck and confused rhetoric. Why not Dante?

The bird whispered once more as he replaced the panel behind them.

"You tink I don't know dey out dere, you got another tink!"

"Who does he think is outside the door?"

"I don't know," said Sklodovich looking around the washroom.

"He'd rather not say."

Accompanied by the fugue of swirling water in a constantly flushing line of cleanser-odor urinals, Sklodovich moved to a toilet stall. Arnold paused, army memored, but followed to see Sklodovich open a small, battleship-gray metal door above the seat.

"Up the pipe," he whispered pointing his finger up the dark shaft beyond the door.

At first Arnold thought he had muttered a dark, empurpled curse against pipes and tubular constructions in his world of welded steel and international plots. Head first Sklodovich disappeared through the hole.

"Close the door behind you," his voice echoed as Arnold watched slippered feet vanish upward into blackness. Reaching into the void, Arnold felt a moist water pipe with which he pulled himself reluctantly after the fast fading sound above him. He closed the metal door and began to move, but the metal door had exhausted him before
he began. Balanced, clinging to wet pipe with one hand and both legs, he had closed the metal door which had no handle on the inside, nothing but a protruding bolt which he struggled against with unprotected fingers. Fear. Total darkness. How many floors above, mygod, how many floors below? Visions of zipping down into limbo like used razor blades down the shafts of hotel bathrooms. Could those blades ever be retrieved, thought Arnold. "And what of me?" Up. The ever-retreating sound of Sklodovich's powerful breathing.

Using the wall, a jagged mass of rough brick, and the protuberant interstices of ancient piping, Arnold inched upward. Skinned right arm on an unidentified outcropping. Wet hands slipping, he rested holding the pipe and easing his ample rear against a somewhat smooth section of cold brick.

"Dr. Led."

The voice was sharp behind, in front, around him with the name of the unseen doctor who was responsible for Arnold's plight. Arnold turned his head in the darkness expecting to see a raven's green glowing eyes. A thin, dusty blade of light cut a line a few inches above his head. Brick dust itched his eyes pressed tight to the slit. A broad white back filled the screen, shifted slightly and exposed the moist, uncomfortable figure of Dr. Lvov, the staff psychiatrist who had interviewed him.

"Funds for the staff party will just have to be collected this year from the staff," said the object of Dr. Lvov's gaze and Arnold recognized the voice of Dr. Nobius-Led. He strained for a view of the head psychiatrist who had remained hidden from him behind a screen during a brief examination, but the slit was too small. "You all know I don't mind putting up the cash out of my own pocket, but I don't think the nonprofessional staff really appreciates it," Led continued. "In fact, I'm quite convinced that they resent it as a move of overt and condescending benevolence. They may equally resent our asking them for funds, but it will be a more controllable resentment."

Lvov opened his collar, pulled his tie down and made an unpleasant face.

"I assume you all agree," said Led. "If anyone feels that it is worth discussing, please see me privately. Dr. Lvov, I understand you want to comment on the Trewitz case before we subject him to the second phase of Drastic Recovery Undercover Project Number One."

"Simply," sighed Lvov, "he is not worth the effort of DRUP. A
borderline case, huh, at best with some minor manifestations which, I admit, are disturbing, but far from worth such attention considering our patient load.”

“Dr. Lvov,” said Led with a trace of petulance, “we have gone over this several times. It is precisely the patient’s lack of extreme manifestation which makes him an ideal subject for this treatment. Our few experiments, as you are well aware, involved cases of extreme difficulty and yielded inconclusive results. Here we have a patient who is clearly borderline, clearly, if I may quote myself, ‘balanced humanly on the razor blade which cuts a fine line between neurosis and more serious psycho-medical disturbance.’ He may be able to exist indefinitely balanced, but he may also be sliced into schizophrenia.”

“I think it highly unlikely,” mumbled Lvov.

“The rest of us disagree,” said Led sharply.

“I do not claim he is a median norm, but there are other cases . . . ,” Lvov trailed off picking his nose while pretending to scratch it.

“Forgive me please, but there is a point which is likely to make a clarification of the issue.” Arnold recognized the voice of the Indian resident, Dr. Randipur. Lvov, the only one Arnold could see, turned to look over his shoulder with irritation at the speaker who was known by patients and staff to be under the wing of Dr. Nobius-Led.

“The mother of this patient is quite willing that he be given transfer to the Garryowen Sanitarium as suggested, Dr. Led. This, I believe, is most sound. Therefore, it is this I suggest. We proceed with Dr. Led’s most excellent plan of Drastic Recovery Undercover Project Number One, on a rapid basis, say twenty-four hours. If, after this time, we will see no results which we are finding to be reportable in a technical report for the purpose of publication and further examination, I suggest that we then approve his transfer to Garryowen.”

Lvov shrugged in defeat as Arnold willed him to make another defense, but if one came it was cut off from Arnold by a broad back which leaned against his viewing slit cutting off sight and sound. In total darkness, Arnold trembled, a victim of DRUP. But what was DRUP? If he didn’t respond to it as expected (whatever response that might be), he would be shipped off to Garryowen. If he responded correctly, what was then in store? Perhaps endless rounds of DRUP and counter-DRUP. Perhaps eventually he would grow large eyes and fear unknown creatures lurking in the halls. Fingers and hopes slipping, Arnold moved upward with no thought but escape
or possible confrontation with Dr. Led, a confrontation in which, somehow, he could convince him of the sanity of Arnold Trewitz.

Back aching, pajama bottoms slipping, he grappled upward. Palms blistered he made an exhausted effort and found himself face to face with a long, thin man whose mouth hung stupidly and perplexedly open. A gray stubble beard surrounded the open mouth and circled a creviced tongue. Arnold almost lost his grip.

"Where have you been?" said Sklodovich pushing the stunned creature from the opening and extending a hand to Arnold. Through the hole, Arnold found himself in another washroom and leaned against the toilet to catch his breath.

The man with the ugly tongue stood, still open mouthed, with his pajamas at his feet and his arms wrapped tightly around his celery-stalk body. He had obviously been interrupted while seated.

"Let's go," said Sklodovich walking to the door.

"Does he know what we're doing here?"

"He?"

"That man," said Arnold.

"I suppose not. Why?"

"Why? I think we scared the hell out of him."

"You think so?" Sklodovich said seriously. "Did we scare the hell out of you, fella?"

The man shook his head wildly.

"See we didn't scare him. Now let's go. If you see anybody in the hall, walk as if you belong here."

Without knowing how one walks in such a situation, Arnold followed him into the hall, leaving the bewildered man behind to make his peace with reality. Patients in the hall paid no attention, but a nurse paused and grabbed Arnold's sleeve. Sklodovich kept walking as if the situation didn't concern him.

"Don't you think you should take that robe off and get a clean one?" she said. "You look as if you've been crawling down a greased pole. I don't see how some of you do it."

"I don't know how it got so dirty. Must have fallen. I'll change right away."

"See that you do." She turned a corner and was gone.

Head aching, Arnold wobbled down the hall after Sklodovich who was waiting for him in a slight alcove. They ducked behind a pillar which hid a window covered by bars. Sklodovich opened the window
and lifted two of the bars which easily slid out of the way. Easing himself out of the window he beckoned for Arnold to follow onto a narrow ledge about ten stories above an enclosed courtyard. A thin rain was falling as Sklodovich helped him onto the ledge which tilted downward at a slight angle.

Sklodovich inched a few feet along the moist ledge, reached up to an old rainspout and pulled himself with one hand over the roof and out of sight. Arnold sighed and followed, remembering the voice of Dr. Led. As he reached the rainspout, his foot slipped and his already blistered hands released the spout.

"Not in my pajamas," Arnold screamed as he felt Sklodovich’s powerful grasp on his left wrist. Detached, Arnold glanced down to watch his slippers plunge, dance and bounce into the rain and out of sight. Sklodovich lifted him, robe flapping, pajamas slipping, easily over the top, jarring him only slightly. Lying on the bepebbled asphalt surface, water streaming into his mouth, Arnold felt an acrid tear mingle with the rain.

"I’ll carry you the rest of the way."

"No thanks." Arnold rose midst the sparse jungle of chimneys, parapets and television aerials.

Limping barefoot on the pinching pebbles, Arnold followed to a protuberance of concrete and a green door to which Sklodovich put his ear before opening it gently.

"Put these on." Sklodovich handed him a pair of sunglasses which, once on, made it doubly difficult to walk down the dimly lighted stairway.

"If anyone asks you, we’re on our way to Dr. Keaky for a heat treatment." Sklodovich too was wearing dark glasses.

"What if they ask us why we’re wet?"

"We just took showers."

"But our robes and pajamas are wet."

"We fell in a pool."

"Is there a pool?"

"I don’t know," he said hurrying down the stairs. "We’re supposed to be mentally unstable remember?"

As they reached another door, Sklodovich raised his dark glasses and paused.

"Remember, we’re on our way to see Dr. Keaky for a . . . ."

"Heat treatment."

"Right."
Drippingly they stepped into an alcove. Arnold, exhausted, warm, and perspiring, felt about to collapse.

"Wait here. Dante is on this floor somewhere. I'll check on the room. It'll just take a minute." Too weak to protest, Arnold watched Sklodovich put his huge hands in sopping pockets and step into the hallway whistling more conspicuously than Arnold thought safe.

The instant Sklodovich turned the corner an unnoticed door before Arnold opened and a short, dark man stepped into the alcove. One hand calmly rested in the pocket of a black silk robe. The other hand held a pistol pointed at Arnold's stomach.

"You will please step quietly into this room," said the man.

"I'm on my way to Dr. Keaky for a heat treatment."

"Nonsense. There is no Dr. Keaky. Please step into this room with no more trouble." Arnold stepped in leaving moist footprints on the tile floor.

The room, Arnold noticed, was much like his own and the few others he had seen except this one looked more permanent, perhaps because of the simple, unpainted table in the corner, the huge trunk near it and the reproduction of a Van Gogh sunflower on the wall.

"You will sit on the chair and I will sit on the bed where it will be quite impossible for you to make a move toward me and live. Very good. You did not know that I could open the door did you? Of course not. You never see the obvious. In many ways you are clever, but in the end your overconfidence betrays you."

"You've got me confused with someone else. Honest to God. I'm a patient just like you. My name's Trewitz. I'm just looking . . . ."

"Take off those sunglasses."

The man did not look as dark, but the gun looked much larger.

"We might be able to arrange some kind of deal," the little man whispered.

"Deal?"

"Perhaps. Remember I can always kill you, push you outside and close the door. The others do not know I have this gun or that I can open the door. Do not move."

"I'm not moving."

"First, we will change clothes. You take yours off first."

"My clothes are wet and they won't fit you. Besides, they don't look much different from yours."

"Clever. I give you credit, but in this case you are also right. I advise you not to move."
"I'm not moving. I didn't move."

"Very good. I'd hate to have to shoot you before you served my purpose. You will walk out of this room in front of me as if you were leading me somewhere. You understand? My gun will not be visible, but it will be in my pocket trained on your back."

"You're making a mistake. We'll get halfway down the hall and they'll grab both of us. I'm a patient too. Don't you understand? I'm a patient too."

"You'd like me to believe that, but I know you have been planted here by Dr. Led. I can always spot you."

"But . . . ."

"No more. One more word and I'm afraid I'll have to shoot. Now move to the door."

Before Arnold could decide on the safety of another protest, Sklodovich stepped into the room cleaning moisture from his face with a dry terrycloth towel.

"Well, what's the scoop?" said Sklodovich.
The little man's eyes darted between his two visitors.

"Do you know this man?"

"It's Arnold. Arnold L. Trewitz."

"What is the 'L' for?" said the man who Arnold now realized must be Dante.

"Lionel," said Arnold.

"Like in trains or Barrymore?"

"What's the difference?"

"World view," said Dante putting his gun in his pocket and pulling out a brown paper bag which he flipped to Sklodovich who moved quickly to the bed and dumped the contents, dozens of walnuts, on the brown, fuzzy blanket. "Well, my welding friend, what can I do for you and how is the electroslag business?"

"They stole my patent," said Sklodovich selecting a walnut and crushing it in one hand, "but what the hell." Arnold slumped to the floor feeling that he was about to pass out, but he managed to disguise his collapse as a floor-sitting slide.

"Staff conference will be over shortly," said the little man looking at his watch. "Suppose we get to business."

Sklodovich looked at Arnold and fished a bit of walnut out of the shell fragments in his hand before responding.

"Escape," he said. Dante grinned.
Eyeing Arnold over his shoulder, Dante stepped to the window and pulled down the shade which he spread out on the bed.

"Your friend is not interested?"

"Arnold."

Arnold rose and staggered to the bed to see an elaborate and confused map of some kind drawn on the back of the shade. Sklodovich assumed an air of rapt attention and continued to crack walnuts and pop them into his grinding mouth.

"Our main problem," said Dante pointing to something on the map to which Arnold paid no attention since he had quickly ruled the man off as a hopeless lunatic, "is the moat. The drawbridge is down during the day, but well guarded. At night it is up, but the guard is small because they don't fear an attack from the rear, a thrust from within at the bowels of their own vile creation. I know the mechanism of the bridge for I've worked on the greasing detail under heavy guard. That mechanism, gentlemen, is the only way. The moat, as you noticed when they brought you in, is not too deep or too long or wide to swim, but it is filled with deadly little fish that can pick a man clean to the bone before he takes two strokes. Therefore, one man, you, Sklodovich," (Sklodovich nodded) "will overpower the drawbridge guard and you, Lionel, will put on the guard's uniform and answer all calls to the guard station while we then work on the bridge. You speak their language, don't you?"

"Yes," said Arnold too weary to flee from the madman whose eyes were now gleaming with intrigue.

"Good. Now as long as they don't put the iron mask back on my head this afternoon, and I doubt if they will since it caused a strawberry rash last time and they had to work on me for days to be sure there would be no complaint from the Swiss legation of the Red Cross when they examined me, gentlemen," he added, wrapping his window shade, "until tonight."

"Dr. Led," said Arnold in an attempt to salvage something from the mad pilgrimage. Sklodovich concentrated on cracking a difficult walnut beneath his huge bicep.

"Nothing to fear from Dr. Nobius-Led," chuckled Dante. "He'd not dare be around at midnight. He knows I've sworn revenge against him."

"That's not what I meant."

"Ah, you're worried about the plan. Believe me it is the best. There's
no chance for a successful tunnel operation. We’d simply fall into the room below and they’d be even more suspicious.”

“Do you know what Dr. Led looks like?”

“Of course. How could I forget my mortal enemy? A tall, gaunt man with fire-red hair flying in all directions and sharply pointed orange mustaches. Glassy-blue eyes trying to escape from their sockets. Not old, but ageless death in doctor’s disguise.”

“I’ve never seen anyone here who fits that description,” said Arnold.

“Me either,” said Sklodovich.

“Nor have I,” said Dante. “But I’ve heard his voice a dozen, dozen times and it told me everything.”

“You’ve never seen him.”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Dante cheerfully. “So I’ve never seen him. Two words and I know any man. One look at his face and his history is open to me; he stands naked. Dante has learned to observe. Take you for example. Your walk, your voice. As soon as you walked in, I could tell you were a Catholic.”

“I’m a Jew.”

“Converted?”

“No.”

“Well I could tell you’ve been married at least five years and have two children.”

“I’m not married.”

“Liar,” hissed the little man and grabbed Arnold by the collar choking him. Sklodovich’s hairy arm appeared before the swimming vision of the tooth-clenched Dante holding Arnold. Dante released him and Arnold reeled back against the wall.

“He was just testing you, weren’t you Arnold?”

“Yes,” Arnold gasped and through clearing eyes saw the little man’s face brighten.

“No patient has ever been allowed to see Dr. Led,” said Dante.

“I’ve got to see him,” Arnold said aloud, but to himself. “I’ve got to see him.” Through sobs he told the two walnut-eating madmen what he had heard while crawling up the pipe. After his story, Dante closed his eyes, grinned and spoke.

“Listen, I have a story that will solve your problem. Once the powerful warden of a Peruvian prison called a jailed friend of mine into a large room filled with guards and newspaper reporters. It was late at night and my friend, a revolutionary, had been wakened from a troubled sleep. He rubbed his eyes at the huge crowd and rubbed
them again when he saw the rare smile under the warden’s black mustache. The warden ordered my friend to a table in the center of the room on which rested a black, cloth bag. Conversation in the room stopped and the warden cleared his throat.

"In honor of the one hundredth anniversary of liberation, an amnesty has been called for all political prisoners," said the warden with a sweep of his fat hand. ‘However, since this prison contains only the worst and most dangerous elements, our president is reluctant to include this man and his fellows. But our president is a fair man who has instructed me to give this man an even chance to secure his freedom and that of all others in this prison. In that bag are two small, white balls. On one is written FREEDOM; on the other PRISON. By virtue of his rank in the subversive underground revolution, this man has been selected to select the ball which will determine his fate and that of the others. He will place his hand in the bag and pull out one ball. If it is the one for FREEDOM, he is free. If it is the other, they all remain. You of the press have been invited to prove that our president is a man of his word. Now take out a ball,’ the warden ordered my friend.

“My friend was no fool. He knew that the fat warden with the great mustache hated him and would not let him get away. What, my friend quickly reasoned, would be a better way than to make him the object of hatred of his fellow inmates? Surely, my friend knew, if he selected the ball marked PRISON, the lower elements in the prison would read of it or hear of it and it would fester until one of them could stand it no longer and would kill my friend for his ill luck. My friend pretended to be sleepy as his mind worked rapidly. ‘There is no chance of my pulling out the right ball,’ he decided looking at the grinning warden and feeling the breath of the reporters. The truth was obvious. Both balls contained the word PRISON and it made no difference which one he picked. No one would dare challenge the powerful warden, second cousin to the president, by asking to see the remaining ball, least of all my friend who knew that such a move would bring an unpleasant death. My friend made up his mind quickly.

“He strode to the table, plunged his hand into the bag and, without looking, threw the ball into his mouth and swallowed it in one gulp. A gasp rose from the crowd and the warden reached for his pistol.

“What are you trying to do?’ shouted the purple-faced warden.
'Nothing,' said my friend innocently pretending a combination of stupidity and drowsiness. 'I thought I was supposed to eat it. Anyway, there is no harm done. All you have to do is see which ball remains in the bag and the one I picked is, by elimination, the other one.'

"'True,' said a sharp-nosed reporter standing near the table. A murmer of approval ran through the reporters who were anxious to discover the fate of the prisoners and were not to be put off by one idiot revolutionary. The warden, teeth clenched, eyes magnificent with hate, dumped the ball on the table. It bounced toward the sharp-nosed reporter who grabbed it and read it.

"'FREEDOM,' said the reporter handing the ball to the warden. 'He ate the PRISON ball.' In an instant the room was clear of reporters rushing to write of my friend's sad selection. Badly shaken, my friend was returned to his cell and several weeks later he was found beaten to death, whether by guards or prisoners no one ever discovered."

Dante reached for a walnut to show that his parable had ended.

"Outsmarted himself," said Sklodovich.

"No," said Dante. "Not at all. He had been absolutely right. Both balls had PRISON marked on them. The sharp-nosed reporter had used a perfect opportunity to do a good turn for the powerful warden who rewarded him by attempting to have him imprisoned a few months later on some trumped-up charge. At that time, the reporter told the truth, but it was too late to do my friend any good and, since the warden denied it as the word of a desperate criminal, it did no good for any of the remaining prisoners either."

"What's this got to do with me?" asked Arnold shivering with cold from his moist pajamas.

"There's little hope for you, Lionel. Realize this, it makes no difference if you find out who Dr. Led is. If he has made up his mind, you are as surely doomed as my friend and you will have as much choice as he had. Either give in to DRUP or escape. Now gentlemen, if you will forgive me, I've got to get some rest. We have a great deal of work tonight."

The little man guided them to the door, his attack on Arnold obviously forgotten, hands once again in his pockets. Sklodovich scooped up his walnuts, winked at Dante and nodded to Arnold to follow him. Over his shoulder Arnold saw the little man climb into bed behind them and as Sklodovich closed the door, a loud snore arose from the still, robed figure.

"Is that gun real?" whispered Arnold.
“No mechanism,” said Sklodovich looking down the hall.

“Does he really expect us to come back tonight?”

“Don’t know. Doesn’t really matter. He wouldn’t leave anyway. He can leave whenever he wants to. His door is open. He just won’t go out unless a doctor or nurse holds his hand and leads him out. He thinks the floor will give way. Something to do with an accident he had in South America.”

The fluorescent corridor was empty and quiet except for a distant muffle of voices. Sklodovich turned toward the door leading to the roof and Arnold felt a sinking, tired feeling in his knees.

“I can’t make it,” he whispered in panic.

Sklodovich winked and with a nod indicated a new direction. Arnold followed him around the corner, down a short corridor and to a door. Walking through the door, Arnold found himself not more than twenty steps from his own room which he had assumed was an odyssey away.

“Why didn’t we just come through here in the first place?” he sobbed.

“There are many ways of doing things,” said Sklodovich taking his arm and helping him to the room. “There’s always an easy way, but to mean something, sometimes it has to be the hard way. Besides, that wasn’t even the hardest way. Hell, I didn’t even take you down the wire or make you put on the nurse’s disguise. Next time we’ll try something different.”

Arnold was never sure whether he passed out before or after he reached the door to his room.

Stuart M. Kaminsky, who has published much nonfiction related to research education in the health professions, has completed a novel and has another in process. His professional positions have included those of photographer, reporter and editor. Currently he is Assistant Director of Public Information for the University of Illinois Medical Center. His writing, he says, has been influenced by Koestler, Camus, Dostoevski, C. Wright Mills, and Georges Simenon.